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One Senator's One-Man Investigation

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ROME, Feb. 8 — The spacious lobby of the Hotel Flora, a few steps from the congested Via Veneto, has been the temporary office of Senator Alfonse M. D'Amato for the last five days. With aides, journalists and Italian officials in tow, the New York Republican has conducted a one-man investigation into the shooting of Pope John Paul II.

Part substance, part show, the effort epitomizes a Washington maxim: when the frustration of grappling with domestic affairs becomes intense, head overseas for a "working trip" that plays well back home.

The Senator's trip is being sponsored by the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe, the American group set up to monitor compliance of the 35 signatories to the 1975 Helsinki accords. The commission, whose 15 members come from the executive and legislative branches of Government, is financed by Congress.

Although officials in the American Embassy here tend to view Mr. D'Amato's visit as a publicity stunt, the trip has not been a junket revolving around the tennis court and swimming pool.

Mr. D'Amato has been on the run from early morning to late evening, meeting with senior Italian officials and prosecutors in addition to American diplomats and intelligence officers. He says his interest in the assassination attempt grew out of a trip to Italy in 1981 when he learned that the Pope had sent a handwritten letter to the Soviet leader, Leonid I. Brezhnev, warning that if the Russians moved to crush the Solidarity Union movement in Poland he would return to Poland to be with his countrymen.

Mr. D'Amato says he informed the Central Intelligence Agency about the letter and identified his source in the Vatican when he returned to Washington.

Interested Constituents

The Senator believes that the letter might have contributed to Soviet fear of the Pope and given the Kremlin the motivation to order his assassination. The Italian investigation of the attack, based on information provided by Mehmet Ali Agca, the Turk convicted

of the May, 1981 assault, has revealed links between Mr. Agca and Bulgaria, raising the possibility that the Bulgarian secret service might have helped plan the shooting.

While the Senator's hard work has been obvious, so, too, are the domestic political benefits of the trip. A Roman Catholic of Italian ancestry, Mr. D'Amato represents a state with a large Catholic population, including millions of voters with Italian and Polish roots. "Clearly this matter is of interest to many of his constituents," said John R. Zagame, the Senator's chief aide.

The Senator conducted a series of press interviews before he left the United States, has made himself available to reporters here and plans to hold a news conference at Kennedy Airport later this week when he returns to New York.

What the Senator will probably not say is how close the trip came to being a disaster.

When he decided to make the journey several weeks ago, his staff notified the Italian Embassy in Washington and asked officials there to set up meetings with Government leaders in Rome and with investigators working on the shooting case.

Asked to Postpone Visit

But a day before Mr. D'Amato was scheduled to depart, Mr. Zagame said, the embassy said that no meetings had been arranged. In addition, at the last minute, an Italian-speaking staff member from the Senate Intelligence Committee, who has followed the investigation closely, had to cancel his plans to accompany the Senator.

He viewed the setbacks ominously, reporting that the C.I.A. had intervened to block the Intelligence Committee's staff member from making the trip. He also produced a telegram from the American Ambassador in Rome, Maxwell Rabb, urging him to postpone the visit because the embassy was preoccupied with an overlapping appearance by Vice President Bush. "There's an effort to impede my investigation," Mr. D'Amato said on the flight.

Once he was in Rome, appointments began to fall in place, although not always through official channels. Before he could shower and change

clothes, Mr. D'Amato was on his way to a meeting with Italy's Minister of the Interior, Virginio Rognoni, apparently arranged at the last minute by the Italian Embassy in Washington.

He returned from the meeting irritated, reporting that the minister had lectured him about the separation of powers in Italy and explained that investigators did not have to brief the Government about developments in the Pope case.

Incensed Over C.I.A. Role

The next morning, after a meeting with a senior American intelligence official at the United States Embassy, Mr. D'Amato's anger grew. "The way he talked about the case, you'd think Agca went to St. Peter's Square to shoot pigeons," he said. The charge that the C.I.A. was ignoring the case and even discouraging others from investigating it became a theme of the visit.

Mr. D'Amato was particularly incensed that the C.I.A. station in Rome had never been informed by agency officials in Washington about the Pope's letter to Mr. Brezhnev or the identity of the Vatican official who told the Senator about it. "I gave them important information and they clearly never followed it up," he complained.

The Senator's aides, undaunted, worked the phones furiously, pleading, cajoling and pressuring officials to meet with him. After some initial expressions of interest by a number of other officials at the American Embassy, the tide appeared to turn and people started avoiding his calls, leading the Senator and his aides to conclude that someone had sent word to avoid him.

Today, as Mr. D'Amato attended a final round of meetings, seeing the Foreign Minister and the Justice Minister, he pronounced himself partly satisfied and partly disappointed with the trip.

Satisfied, he said, because he was convinced that the Italians were seriously pursuing the investigation and had come up with solid evidence that the Bulgarian Government probably played a role in planning the shooting.

Disappointed, he said, because, "It's been clearly demonstrated that our own intelligence services are doing a less than adequate job."